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Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7719d4nr>

Journal

French Studies, 68(4)

ISSN

0016-1128

Author

Stefanovska, M

Publication Date

2014-10-01

DOI

10.1093/fs/knu223

Peer reviewed

<stefanov@humnet.ucla.edu>

Transgressing Boundaries: Worldly Conversation, Politeness and Sociability in Ancien Régime France, 1660–1789. By TUOMAS TIKANOJA. Helsinki: Unigrafia Oy, 2013. 277 pp., ill.

This ambitious study covers a central topic of the cultural history of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France: conversation. It draws on a wide array of sources, from novels and memoirs, treatises on politeness and courtly behaviour, to plays and historical accounts, and on authors from Baldassare Castiglione to Madeleine de Scudéry, Voltaire, and Marivaux. Tuomas Tikanoja, eager to situate himself within the field of study of ‘sociability as a constitutive element of early modern identity’ (p. 1), draws on the work of an impressive number of scholars, such as Jürgen Habermas, Dena Goodman, Daniel Gordon, Norbert Elias, Roger Chartier, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, Georg Simmel, and Erving Goffman. Clearly, he has read everything written on worldly conversation, self-representation, politeness, and sociability, from early modern practitioners to present-day scholars. Such exhaustiveness, however, might be said to constitute the author’s downfall, for, despite much interesting information over the nine chapters, it is difficult to find any original or clearly defined thesis. Tikanoja’s basic assumption is that ‘Ancien Régime high society did constitute a particular cultural and social space, which by its distinctive set of cultural values, spirit and way of life distinguished itself from

prevailing values and way of life represented by the court, which, as a theoretical standpoint goes with Habermas's and Gordon's premises' (p. 9). And he maintains that '*social identity both manifested itself and was largely defined by interaction and diverse communicative strategies*, rather than by social structure or social, political or economic dependencies in the history of absolutism' (p. 11, emphasis original). These two quotations alone give an idea of the study's principal problem: the vagueness of the author's hypotheses, which makes it hard for them to be tested against the various issues raised, such as the relationship between the *honnête homme* and the art of pleasing (Chapter 3), the study of the salons as 'spaces of sociability' (Chapter 6), the worldly and educational aspect of cultivated conversation (Chapter 8), or the claim to authentic sociability (Chapter 9). Most chapters mix centuries, sources, and issues, and assert a 'horizontal' sociability in worldly conversation as opposed to a model of 'vertical sociability' obtained through simplifying Norbert Elias and attributed to the court; but that tendency to carry on an 'egalitarian exchange' in conversation is hardly a revolutionary new thesis.

Because of Tikanoja's imperfect knowledge of French and his lack of writing skills, the volume is hardly a pleasure to read, and errors, inconsistencies, and typos abound. Sadly, the most beautiful aspect of the book is its high-quality reproduction of a Fragonard painting on the front cover.

MALINA STEFANOVSKA
UCLA